

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SHIFTING GEARS PROJECT
HOLYOKE

INFORMANT: MAGGI PIERCE
INTERVIEWER: LINDA MORLEY
DATE: OCTOBER 2, 1988

M = LINDA MORLEY
P = MAGGI PIERCE

SG-HO-T328

[there is a great deal of festival noise in the background throughout the entire interview, making it difficult to hear at times]

M: Okay. [two people talk: unclear] Well this is Linda Morley. I'm interviewing Maggi Pierce. Uh this is the program for the Shifting Gears, a history of work; and we are at the Heritage State Park in Holyoke, Massachusetts on the second of October, nineteen hundred and eighty-eight; and um, we are at the Massachusetts Folklife Festival. Uh, Maggi, this is a, an oral history of work, (P: Yes) and we're really interested in finding out, first of all, a brief biography of yourself so that it gives us a little context in which to put it; and then I'd like to talk about, you know making a living, the kinds of things you've done in your life, (M: Um hm) and your attitudes towards that.

P: Okay. Well uh, I better warn you, I've had a whole lot of kinds of job in my life. For example, uh I left school when I was fourteen, and my first job was in a linen firm in the city of Belfast where I was reared. And there I worked a forty-four hour week, a-, as an office worker. I mean I was, I was actually coping with uh pay as you earn wage sheets when I was fourteen; which was, I now realize in retrospect was really quite a heavy job for a child to do. I rarely made any mistakes; I really liked the work, but uh there wasn't too much of it and I eventually moved to an insurance company which I hated with all my heart. It was the nearest thing to Bleak House, you know by Dickens, that I've ever come across. Nasty people, um, very Victorian in their whole attitude to children. Uh, but of course on the other hand, I learned the rudiments of office work there, in a way that I hadn't in the linen house which was a very small linen house. Whereas in the insurance company, my first job, you're going to laugh when you hear this, was to clean out inkwells. [interviewer laughs] I had to clean out inkwells and make sure that nibs were clean. Y-I mean we literally used nibs that you put on and took out every night. And uh you had to make sure that the ink wasn't sort of settling into a clot in the bottom of the inkwell, otherwise you'd hear about it. And of course also such things as penmanship was

remarked upon. Uh all our ledgers were huge, huge things, you know they must have been around about two feet by two feet. And these had to be carried up and down three flights of stairs every day by me and maybe a couple of the wee office boys; and when you had to put sheets in you had to literally unwind them at the bottom, and then slowly take them out and put in the new sheets. If your, if your penmanship was not good enough, uh the head of the Accounts Department would come round and say, "Miss [Kerr], Miss [Kerr], I thought that a drunken spider had walked across the page today." And there was that sort of shit to put up with.

M: [laughing] There's, there's this great, great grandson [both talk; interviewer unclear]

P: There's a little spider. That's lovely. I love [the sight of him]. Top of the machine. But uh, at any rate those were the sort of people that I worked with. There were a couple of nice ones, but I would have said that in a, our, uh, uh, a business of maybe f-forty people there were maybe three nice ones. And the rest, I don't know where they came from. I mean they were all Irish, but it, maybe it was insurance. Maybe insurance attracts a certain type of person.

M: Or at that time.

P: I, uh or at that time. But at any rate uh, I, within two years, and I was earning a good wage and I liked my work, it was the people I didn't like. I, I've always enjoyed work.

M: So your work was doing the accounting and (P: Accounting) after the, after the inkwell cleaning.

P: Yes, after the inkwell cleaning I got on to penmanship and, and actual accounts and sending out statements and all. And that's all, everything was done you understand by hand. All statements were always written out. And uh, we had an adding machine. I think I was allowed to use it maybe in the, you know, the second year of my employment there. But then after that my sister and I left to wander in Europe. And my sister and I stayed in youth hostels, and we worked in every way! We wor-, we cleaned out lavatories, for example, in [Gosslar], in, in Hartz, in the North of Germany. And we uh made millions of sandwiches for a little, little jugend, deutsches jugend, who were of course needless to say walking over hill and dale in those parts. And we worked there for about two shillings a day, I don't know how much that would be today, like maybe ten, a dime, or something like that. But we, we got our food and we also got a smattering of German. And uh, we lived in Germany for uh I guess maybe around about six weeks or something. And eventually made our way up to Stockholm, and in Stockholm we worked in factories for eight months. And we first of all, first of all, no I'm making a mistake. First of all we worked in Pub, which is a, a, is a store. It, I think it actually still is there in the middle of Stockholm, opposite to the opera house. And uh we worked in this large store called Pub, P-U-B. And uh, w-, there we, we washed dishes, and we worked uh like most foreigners did, in the most menial tasks. And of course you had to get a, a work permit, and the, the Swedes were only too happy, this was about 1949, the, the Swedes were only too happy to give you know grueling, difficult, boring work to foreigners. So therefore in that place where we worked, in the kitchen, eh worked mostly with Finns, a couple of Russians, some French boys, the French boys were very lazy, I hate to admit that they were. But the Finns and the Irish worked splendidly together. And unfortunately we used to get so carried away with our

dishwashing and laughter, and singing folk songs to one another; because the Finns were wonderful, they knew so many country songs, and they would sing a song, and Dorothy and I would sing a song, and it, back and forth it would go; that we were told that we'd get the sack if we didn't keep quiet. [interviewer laughs] So we worked there for about six months, and then we moved (- -)

M: Did that stop you?

P: No not six months, I'm sorry, two months. Yes it did, because of course money is money you know. So we sang quietly. [interviewer laughs] I won't say it stopped us you know eh, Linda. But uh, at any rate we moved from there to a job, an actual job which was in a chocolate factory. And that was awful work because you were working actually on large machines that had to be very well cleaned. And of course Dorothy and I had never worked on machines before. And you had to leave them spotless, you know they had to be wired brushed, all of this sort of thing. And we were, we were working on liqueurs, and liqueurs are some of the most difficult, sticky chocolates to work with. And of course every now and again you would come on a, a large chocolate filled with punch, and the top would be just that little bit too thin. And when the machine would wrap it in silver paper, smash would go the center of the chocolate, and it meant that you had to strip your machine, and that would take anything up to half an hour to forty minutes to clean that machine. And of course we were on uh, we were eh at that time on piece work. And it meant that we made very, very little. And also of course the people were very unkind there, because you know we were two foreigners and Swedes were naturally uh, uh very, th-, they, they treated us with great disdain. And they were nasty people to work for. Whereas when we went to work, I called it the screw and bolt factory for want of a better name. I still don't know what the hell we made, [interviewer laughs] I think it was part of a meter? [interviewer laughs] But we moved at any rate and got into this other place, and there (- -)

M: Also in, where, what town?

P: Also, outside of Stockholm. (M: Um hm) Outside of [Abrahamsborg], (M: Um hm) which was al-, right next to an industrial site, (M: Um hm) and we would walk across the frozen lake which would quake in the early morning. And we would start work at six and finish at two, or we'd start at two and finish at ten. There were the two, the two different um, uh, wh-at do you call those? (M: Shifts) Shifts. And eh, that was a much happier job to do. It wasn't very well paid, but the people were lovely, and what that particular company had realized, and I think very wisely, was that foreigners could work together better than mixing foreigners with Swedes. So they literally isolated all foreigners. So we were working with, with Germans, Italian, Poles, um people from the concentration camps with numbers on their arms, um Danes who always had their hair uh dyed, and, and uh, um put into waves, and they used to work with a, these were males, and they weren't homosexuals.

M: When you say dyed, what do you mean?

P: Dyed, D-Y-E-D.

M: But I mean, blondes?

P: But th-, they, they dyed their hair blonde and they were mostly elderly men, married, their wives worked in the same room. But they were very keen on keeping up appearances, and I always remember that many, a-about three of them used to sit with little hairnets over their head to keep their waves in for the big party. [interviewer laughs] And they were the nicest people to work with! They were lovely! And uh we also worked of course with uh Belgiques and a couple of Dutch (M: Uh huh) as well. So, and Norwegians, a lot of Norwegians because of course at that time in forty-nine Norway and Finland were poverty-stricken countries. I mean now, thank God, they are wonderful countries and rich, and with high standards of living. But in those days they were truthfully poverty-stricken. So many of them came down to the Valhalla shall we say of Sweden, to work and to make a life for themselves. But they always kept traveling back to Finland, traveling back to Norway. A-and I don't know whether they eventually settled in Stockholm or not. I'm not too sure, but some of them were like us. They worked like maybe for eight months in Sweden, you know. [interviewer speaks: unclear] And after we left Sweden we eventually eh moved, we went up to, to Lapland and, and eh into Norway and uh didn't work anywhere. We were just traveling. We were hitchhiking, went by bus, by wa-, we did a lot of walking in Norway, too. A lot of hiking over the mountains, etc. And we eventually made our way back to Germany where we had all our money stolen. This is just by the way. And luckily an old soldier's club from the First World War heard of our plight, and they very kindly gave us a-, enough money to get back to Amsterdam. And the youth hostel in Amsterdam put my sister and me up for nothing for three solid weeks as we searched for work. Because we of course did not want to go home without, at, you know with our tail between our legs. And we were stupid! We left our money sitting on a table in, you know war-torn Germany and somebody stole it. [interviewer laughs] So what happened was that uh they lent us the money and we finally found a job in Amsterdam and that was actually in an [unclear], which was actually a, a coat, a co-, a large coat factory called Berghaus, B-E-R-G-H-A-U-S. And eh, it was a very large affair. And what we did, we worked at the hand table, the [handtaffel]. And there people who did handwork worked. And we did such things as stitching the linings. You know after you get linings, you don't realize that your, you, they don't just stitch up the outside and inside the sleeves. They affix them with very deep, thick stitches, d-at the nape of the neck and underneath each of the arms. And of course as well as that you have to also affix it at the back. And also sew on buttons.

M: And the, isn't the [both talk]

P: And that was all hand work.

M: Bottom of the lining also handwork?

P: Eh, no,

M: Putting it in?

P: No, ha-, handwork, no. That, that part is done actually, or was done, by machine, but then you had to stitch very carefully so that there was a, a length of, of sewn thread between the

back of the coat and the lining, to give the lining (M: Room) leeway to move because otherwise if it were just stitched it would eventually rub with too much wear. Whereas with that length of strong, sturdy thread, it would give it leeway just like um, just like a tent, or, or um, or a, a, what do you call it on a boat? A sail on a boat. It needs to have that leeway that, that it can move (M: Mmm) with the person's movements. So we worked there for six months and then we ha-, heard word from home, because of course we wrote to our mother and father every week, we suddenly had word that our father was desperately ill. So we left and we had been intending to, to go down to Spain and then home, because we had been away two years. But when we got word that Daddy was desperately ill, we went home and our father died within two weeks. (M: Ohh) And after that I thought I would have great difficulty in getting any job because I mean people in Ireland are very suspicious of people who go off and have a good time. Especially in the North of Ireland, you know people [both talk]

M: Especially young women,

P: Frown at you.

M: Going off and having a good time?

P: [both talk; interviewer unclear] No it wasn't so much, no it wa-, no it wasn't even that. It was the fact that they mi-, they might think that you were, you were not dependable. (M: Uh huh) And I luckily um appeared for a, an interview, and um, at a sales department in a road construction firm. And, and I told them the truth. You know I'd been away for two years, and the man said to me, "Well gee, I'm, I'm really sorry because I, I really, I really like you and w-, you have to work with the public in the Sales Department, and I think you'd be good at it," but he said, "We have already accepted a person for this job." Because I had got the letter a day late or something like that you know. And uh so I said, "Oh well," you know, "all right, that's fine. Thanks very much." And lo and behold, didn't I get a letter that next morning um, by a young man who a-, who's a great friend of mine to this day, saying uh, "Dear Miss Kerr, we'd like to see you again, because the young woman who had accepted the job has turned us down. Would you come down instantly and meet the directors of the firm, and then we can talk about wages, etc." So I worked actually as a secretary in the Sales Department of, of a road construction firm for seven years. And loved it! Really loved it. But during all of this time I was collecting sayings. Everybody in that road construction firm knew that I collected sayings. (M: Uh huh) And you know people would come in and they'd say things like um, "The tea was that strong I could trot a mouse on it." [interviewer laughs] You know whereas I would, I would, knew the saying where my father would say, "Have you a couple of matches?" And you would say, "Why?" And he'd say, "This poor tea needs crutches." [interviewer chuckles] You know, a-and people knew that I collected all of these sayings, and uh, I started of course to add with sayings, but also at, at that time I was uh, very well-known so far as um folk singing was concerned.

M: In Belfast?

P: In Belfast. But, but not in the way that I would be known like in, in America. I was known, if we were visiting in people's houses, like for example, David Hammond, who's very well known now in Ulster; um he was going around collecting, he collected a couple of his songs

from me. Of course I didn't know what the hell he was up to. I, I said, "Sure, David, sure," not realizing that he would eventually end up as you know a leading [BBCite] in the North, and making [poems] of children's street games. And what do I do, I end up writing about people [that were boiling] on children's street games. You know. So it's funny how life works sometimes.

M: Well, in a way uh, your hobby of that time fed into what later became your work, didn't it?

P: Absolutely. (M: Yeah) Yes, Linda, you're (M: Yes) very, very right. Because of course by, by leaving Ireland (- -) You know when you leave a place you realize it's value. Sometimes when you live in a place you take it, you know familiarity breeds contempt? Well, it wasn't fa-, eh uh familiarity didn't exactly breed contempt with many people, but they took it for granted. And many people forgot what they had known as a child. You know, a couple of my rhymes I couldn't remember, couldn't remember the end of them, or I couldn't remember maybe the first line of say a four, a four line rhyme. And uh when I would ask people at home they'd look at me and they'd say, "I never knew that rhyme." And I'd say, "For God's sake, Daphne, we stepped in the street to it." "No. no, I don't remember that at all." And then I would give some other rhyme, and then they would say, "Oh yes, yes, I remember that!" And then suddenly out of the blue they'd say, "Would that line be..." and then they'd give me that line that I was searching for. In other words, it was as if they put childhood away in mothballs and totally forgot about it. (M: Mm) It was very strange. Whereas with me, eh moving around and, and meeting different people, when somebody in, in uh Germany would say you know um, um "Eisenbahn, eisenbahn, locomotiv, wenn sie nicht weiter kann macht sie ein [unclear]," which is a children's rhyme, I immediately would answer you know with uh "Not last night, but the night before, three tomcats came knocking at the door. I went downstairs for to let them in, and they knocked me down with a rolling pin." And you see, realizing that Ireland wasn't the only place in the world, it also opened me out to how interesting Ireland was. How interesting the culture. How interesting the culture was. And when you're living with a culture you pay hardly any attention. You just take it for granted. (M: Sure) You know, and of course with all of that, then it fed into my profession today. (M: Um hm)

M: All right, so then here you were in this construction firm, (P: Yes) you'd been very happy in your work, (P: Very happy) and you had a very happy hobby life going, and, (P: Yes, that's right) which really must have entered into your social life, too to some degree.

P: Ve-, very definitely indeed. (M: Uh huh) Very definitely indeed.

M: What made you leave that employment?

P: Well the thing that left me, made me leave the employment was that I really got into very bad cahoots with the boss. Because he was a very lazy man and he was English, which of course in itself was bad in Ireland. Because you always have a stroke against you if you're English in Ireland, which is not fair, because I had a, a great uncle by the name of Uncle Albert Murphy, who was the salt of the earth from Bath, Somerset. And he was wonderful. But you know people are looking out for faults in an Englishman working in the North. And that was the way it

was with my boss. He was very difficult to work with. And finally there was one day that I just said, "Well to hell with that! I've had it." Because he was one of those men who would say, "I'm so sorry my secretary didn't give you uh, didn't give me the message." When of course I had and he'd blame me. And I finally, I couldn't stand that. (M: Mm) So one day I told him to get up and get lost. And I mean for years you know the directors had said, cajoled me into staying. You know every time I had a fight about something. But that time it was enough. So eventually I took a job, once again, in a very l-, large linen firm in Bond Street in London. And there I was private secretary to the accountant.

M: So you moved out of Ireland?

P: I moved out of Ireland. But there was another reason for moving out of Ireland that I must not leave out, ah Linda. And that was the fact that for years, I mean not until I was fourteen, and uh first of all, and, a-, six months and a business college, did I ever meet a Roman Catholic. I mean really know a Roman Catholic. I mean there were, there were some Roman Catholics living on our street, and they were nice folk, and you would say, "Hello, Mrs. Dailey," you know, "Hello, hello l-," you know, "Mrs.-, Hello Mrs. McGrath, hello Mr. McGrath," but you wouldn't really know them. Whereas it wasn't until I went to business school and met Mary McCarthy, who was a lovely, lovely girl, that I really knew a Catholic. I really knew a Catholic. (M: Mm) And then when I was youth hosteling and hiking in the mountains, then of course we, we ran around with Catholics. You never went with one.

M: You mean boyfriend, girlfriend.

P: Not boyfriend, girlfriend. You never, never did that. Never did that. Because you always knew that all it would ha-, bring would be unhappiness in the family. And in, in, at least in the North, and I'm sure it's the same in the South, but you never, never wanted to bring pain in your family. The family, the clan, was extremely important. (M: Um hm) You could maybe bring, you could maybe bring uh, uh pain in your family by accident. But, but not knowingly starting going with a person who was Catholic or vice versa you know, if you were a Catholic going with a Protestant girl. Because what would happen is that invariably they would have to leave the country to get married. (M: Hm) They wouldn't even marry in Ireland. They had to leave the country. I knew at least three people at, three lots you know, six people I knew, who all went to Canada or America to marry, because they were mixed. They'd, had unfortunately fallen in love with the wrong person. But we never allowed ourselves to fall in love with the wrong person. You just didn't, you just didn't let that situation arise. And sometimes it was a pity, because there were some lovely Catholic boys. Really nice, you know, whom I, whom I went around with.

M: As a pal.

P: But I knew that that was it. Yes.

M: As a pal. (P: Uh huh) Yeah.

P: Over that line you never went, you know, (M: So you) at all.

M: So um (- -)

P: So I went to London, and ah, London was a place that was very exciting, but I didn't really care for it. It wasn't a lucky place for me. The w-, I liked working on Bond Street, you know. I really did like working on Bond Street. It was very exciting. And I loved working in of course I think one of the finest linen shops. It was called [Gavane's], on Bond Street. And it was a very old firm.

M: Was this also office type work?

P: Yes of course. I was, I was private secretary to, to the, the uh chie-, the chief accountant. And I would write off to the Honorable Miss Phoebe etc. when I saw the announcement of her engagement, eh saying that we had some magnificent linen wear that we would be pleased to show her at any time if she were making up her trousseau. And stuff like that you know. [interviewer laughs] It was very nice work, and I really, I liked my boss. He was a very nice man. Uh, but I realized that London was not for me, (M: Um hm) and I went home for a short while and then eventually I went to Scotland. (M: Um hm) And uh went to Edinburgh, and uh got work in Edinburgh with very little trouble. Again, office work. (M: Um hm) I worked in a legal office for a while. Loved the people! The nicest office people I ever worked with in my life. But couldn't stand the work. So I went up to my, to the man who had hired me, because it was on a salary, you know a monthly wage, and I said to him, "I am so sorry but I have come to say to you that I really don't like this work." I said, "I have come to the conclusion that I really, I really only like working with dirty commerce." And he threw back his head and he laughed and laughed. And the next week I went up for an interview in Scottish and Newcastle Breweries, for a private secretary to the the Chief Engineer. And that was the job that I kept until I married Ken Pierce. [both talk; Mrs. Pierce unclear]

M: Now I want to a-, go back and ask a little question there. (P: Sure) He obviously knew exactly what you meant. (P: Yes, yes) And can you inform uh, an American audience of young people just what that probably meant.

P: I, I, I, I would really and truly find it difficult. Al-, all I can say that there was an awful lot of work with figures. You were typing figures an awful lot. And you needed to be very correct, and you did an awful lot of copy typing. And I have always despised copy typing. Copy typing is something that a minion could do. And to me secretarial work is a lot more than just typing letters. Ah, a good secretary should do everything, besides organizing hotels, and uh getting your boss his tickets to Outer Mongolia, shall we say, and getting everything fixed up. A-a- (- -)

M: There's a lot of responsibility in that.

P: A lot of responsibility in that.

M: And you prefer that.

P: And it's wonderful. (M: Of course) And I preferred that. And when I worked in Scottish and Newcastle, eh, I spoke of course a smattering of, well I spoke reasonably good Dutch in those days, and we used to have Dutch people coming in to the office, and they were always delighted that [unclear] Kerr could speak to them in their own language. And we would have a little chat. And then also, eh because of course of my working in the Engineering Department, a, a, a great number of our tuns, T-U-N-S, in which the, the uh beer was made, eh of course came from Germany, you know the finest engineers in the world, and a lot of their books were only in German. And of course our engineers occasionally would run into a really sticky problem. And they would bring down the book and say, "Miss Kerr, Miss Kerr, can you translate this?" And of course German being such an organized language, I could say to them, "Mr. Jack, I won't be able to give you the exact word, but I will describe it by the noun. I will give you a b-," because you know very often a word in German will be four words strung together. And I said, "I will give you a translation of the four words together. And then you see what I'm talking about." And never once did they not understand what I meant. It was very interesting. And also of course occasionally when something really went wrong with the Ger-, German engineering, a little Bavarian would be brought over from Munich, and he could only speak um you know um Munschen, you know very, very difficult dialect. But of course he could understand Hochdeutsch. And, and I would be able to take him to the hotel, tell him at what time the car would be coming up the next morning. In other words, I didn't really need to speak fluent eh German, but I needed to speak enough. And my boss, a Mr. [Lettle], one of the finest men I have ever met in my life, he took great delight in this sort of additional, additional gift that I had for languages. (M: Oh I guess so!) And he, and, and, and he felt that in some strange way, and this is a very masculine thing, he felt that the glory of my being able to translate and being able to help, you know the directors, Lord this and Lady that, you know, uh being able to help them somehow or other reflected on him. And this gave him great happiness. And in my reference, which of course I've never used, he mentions this fact. That my knowledge of foreign languages was also a great additional um talent that I had. And then when I came of course to America, uh I worked in a very boring job, uh outside of New Bedford, a lot of copy typing. But luckily I also worked with some engineers who were taking an idea from zero up, and that's the sort of work that I love doing. That even though I was typing it and of course a lot of the, the really fine uh knowledge of what I was typing went over my head. Much of it didn't. (M: Uh huh) And uh, that, that proved of, of great interest to me, but uh, the work itself was, I, I, I wasn't, I wasn't sorry to leave it, let's put it that way. And I left it because I was six months pregnant, and I was huge because I had twins, and, and that meant that instead of being able to work up until maybe the eighth month, I had to leave in the sixth. So I only worked I guess for about eight or nine months I presume there, (M: Um hm) before I, before I left. And since then of course, I have worked at no other jobs except teaching in the high school. I taught German in New Bedford High, and I also taught one semester of art history, from David to Dali, believe it or not, at Southeastern Mass University. And I didn't just, these were both times when they couldn't get anyone else.

M: In the meantime you had taken a degree, is that it? Or is that [both talk] before you had your degree?

P: Eh, I had, I had taken a degree in German, (M: Right) and (M: Yeah) taken a degree in art history. (M: I see) And uh, i-it was very interesting that I was able to do that. But that's the

only sort of formal work that I have done since I came to America, without-, except for that first eight months when I first landed here.

M: Well it's interesting that you think of uh a difference in terms of form between that work and the work that you really now would be known as doing, (P: Yes) which is storytelling.

P: Storytelling, yes, exactly. Yes.

M: Ah, I'd like to interject a little comment to the young people listening to this tape because you, you must understand from having heard Maggi what a wonderful memory she has. And American children are not encouraged in the speaking of foreign languages and the studying of foreign languages; (P: That's right) and in fact, we're often intimidated uh against this, so that one is against the study of these languages, and but you are a perfect example of a person who is lively minded, and with a good memory, of what that can bring you to. (P: Um hm) And I think I think that's something that young people listening to this tape could take away (P: Yes!) with them.

P: And, and I also think that many people eh think that learning a foreign language merely means that you can read and write and speak in a foreign language. That is not it. The real icing on the cake is that you learn a whole new culture! And that is what is exciting. Never mind the language.

M: That really is exciting and we are lead, I think American children are lead to believe they don't have the capabilities for that, (P: Yes) and that you should be encouraged into it.

[end of side one]

M: (- -) impress upon uh young people that the foreign language is not a difficult thing. It is time consuming to (P: Time consuming) learn a foreign lo-, language, (P: Yes) but the rewards are enormous, and the financial awards in work, in our time, are really quite incredible. In a, in a world that is coming to be increasingly, uh fewer jobs, fewer types of jobs, it will often be the person who masters a second language or a third language even, (P: Yes) who will get the better job, or who will get the only job.

P: Exactly. (M: Yes) Exactly.

M: Well, I wanted to interject that in because, in many ways, we, we recognize you as an exceptional person, but in many ways you are an ordinary person, (P: Very ordinary) and you have (P: Yes) built on (P: Yes) these talents (P: Yes) that perhaps uh were not that great in childhood, but were there, and were built upon through life. (P: Yes) And we all have such talents and we have to learn to look at them when we're young. (P: Yes) Yes. Well, um, Maggi, it's very interesting I think in a world where entertainment is both absolutely central to our lives, and peripheral, where it's in a box on television, so that while we engage ourselves in our very homes in watching this, it is after all something that's not living and, and, and, and breathing with

us in that space, so that it's both intimate and remote, that the experience of moving among people in small intimate situations, doing storytelling, does add um an important dimension to entertainment in our time. (P: Yes) And I wondered if you uh could tell us something of what it means to you in terms of work to do that kind of work.

P: I feel that, I feel that in, in making people aware that intimacy is not a thing to be frightened of, is in itself important, because I find that many people, eh they're not frightened to go to a, a big show, eh they're not frightened to even sit in a cinema, but to actually sit and listen quietly for half an hour or maybe forty-five minutes to someone, someone perhaps reminiscing or speaking about their work, or telling a story, ah, makes them aware that they too have stories in their own life; and that there are other things to life besides uh, besides TV. I mean TV is really canned entertainment in the, in the worst possible way. And even although we all enjoy it, I mean I, I, since I've been staying here you know with a color TV and a cinema channel at this fancy hotel, eh I have enjoyed the films that I have seen. They've been remarkably good, ah and I can't say that I haven't enjoyed them. But I couldn't cope with having eh TV morning, noon and night, the way unfortunately many people do in this, in this day and age. (M: Hm)

M: Um, in, in terms of work, um, what are the problems that someone in our country, in our society, which is really tied into formal work structures as you have described your earlier work life, to me, [Mrs. Pierce laughs] what are some of the problems that a worker faces in the small arena entertainment work?

P: Well, I think, I think eh it is something that all artists have suffered from. I mean what uh many people do not realize is that many artists in the old days, and I mean, I'm saying jugglers in the marketplace, etc., storytellers in the marketplace, or perhaps the harpist in the large hall, many of them were lucky enough to have patrons. The really fine ones had patrons.

M: What does that mean?

P: And uh, well, uh, uh to have a patron would be a person who would literally give you a, a place to sleep, maybe even a house to, to live in. And this of course went even to India. For example, many of the rajahs uh had the court artist. I, I knew uh the daughter of a court artist of the Maharajah Maharishi of, I forget, Sinjapoor or some funny name like that. Ah, ah, but the thing is then that that artist had to do what his patron asked him to. And eh, the, the man whom I heard of, eh Margaret's father, eh, he had to paint particularly sheep, believe it or not, because the Rajah had a flock of reknowned fattailed sheep. Now I know that sounds funny, but you see there, there again sometimes the patron thinks that he not only helps you to live, but that he demands that you do what he asks you to.

M: He has a right (- -)

P: So forever there is this pulling away. One way the artist would, would love a certain stability within society and yet very often when we give, get stability, we get it at a price. Uh I remember wh-, the first time I ever heard Eugene O'Neill's A Long Day [sic] Journey into Night. The greatest curse of his father was that he, he had been famous in a particular part, and he just played it on, wasn't that, isn't, wasn't (M: Yes) that it? And he played it on and on and on and on.

And by that he killed, he killed the gift that he had had. (M: Um hm) And, and I think that this is what we have to be very careful about. Like for example, eh many storytellers eh are, because they make storytelling the be-all and end-all of their lives, eh, they, they do, they have to make money. An in order to make money they become nothing but storytellers for children. And I, as you know, Linda, have fought rigorously against this, because what is my tradition? My tradition is is that little children should be seen and not heard. That in other words if children happen to be by when storytelling is taking place, then they give to the storyteller and the story, especially the story, the respect that it deserves. Nowadays so many storytellers go into eh, i-, go into schools and they do everything but stand on their heads, and they do funny, funny stories; anything to attract the child into listening. And, and I l-, work very tightly within my tradition. I will never change a story for children. I tell the story maybe as bloody and all as it might be, if children happen to be there, well that's just too bad. Let them listen to their little ears, you know and if Mama wants to pull them away then let her. But let them listen the way we listened. Let the children imbibe what is there, because storytelling at home was definitely for the adults. (M: Um hm) I mean my mother of course told me stories. So did Daddy. But there again it wasn't just for children. It was, it was stories that they happened, which of course with the [Fen McCool] legends and the like. And, and I remember my mother told me when she was cleaning the tubs. I mean I always remember Mommy would be polishing up the brasses you know. And, and I remember one day, I must have been eight or nine, I, I, it was when the War was on, and Mommy was telling me about [Fen McCool] and I said to her, "Mommy, where, where did you, where did you hear that story? Where did you (- -)" And she said, "Ah it's nothing but a lot of old nonsense, dear." But in actual fact it had come down you see. (M: Sure) Come down the pike as they say. And uh (- -)

M: Well I think there are a lot of implications in what you're saying here, Maggi. You're saying that the artist has a job to do. (P: Yes) the artist has um a need as an artist, and the artist has to fit an audience. (P: Exactly) So (- -)

P: And this is, this is very, very difficult. I mean this is one of the reasons that I feel free today to actually say to people, when they say to me um "We would like you to tell (- -)"

M: Let's just put this on pause for a second. [background music has come very loud] We have su-, little, little, whoops! [giggles]

P: Hey I don't remember what I was saying.

M: Little. It's noisy. Well we were talking about the pulls, the different pulls on um one's art, on being, having an audience to deal with and (- -)

P: Oh yes, yes! What I said that uh I, I understand how many people eh take it for granted that storytelling is nothing in a way but glorified babysitting you know for children. Uh, and of course I fight against this. But when people ring me up asking me to do work for children, and of course I'm well enough known now that I can refuse work, and do. But what I always say is "I know three people that you can easily get in touch with, and they're wonderful with children's work." And these people don't have the same uh, oo uh tearing of the entrails that I have. Because people don't realize when they're telling a story, they're telling a story in American.

When I'm telling a folktale, I am telling it with all my background uh of, of tradition, of dialect, of language, (M: Um hm) and it means that if I am telling children a story I have to cut out my language. Now that kills my story and my story to me is the most important thing. I'm not important, but my story is. (M: Um hm) And my story can only be told in Northern Irish dialect. (M: Sure) And they, and the language that I grew up with in the singing streets of Belfast as they call it (- -)

M: So this is true of the stories that you actually heard then and the stories you've learned from that tradition since you've grown up.

P: I, absolutely! I mean, because sometimes you know I'll, I'll find a story. I, as, as I think you know, I collect eh mermaid and sail stories particularly. And one of the stories that I collected eh maybe about uh, oh it must be eight years ago, because it was about the last year that I was in school. I'd gone up actually to eh, to look up some German short stories that Albrecht Durer had illustrated, believe it or not, and I was into Albrecht Durer at that time. And he had been an illustrator, and I went up to read some of the short stories that his illustrations were with, and whilst I passed, I looked up at the bookshelf and here, lo and behold, was a very small shelf dealing with Irish books. And one of them was a collection by Patrick Collum, I can't remember what the hell you called it, you know, Collection of Irish Stories, but it was a tome.

M: Flying, (P: And) flying something, (P: You know) swans, (P: And, and I) flying swans.

P: I lifted it down. And I leafed through it the way one does, you maybe look at the contents, and then I leafed through it. And I, I must have did, eh I must admit I did it in a very haphazard manner. And uh I said, "Ach there's nothing there for me." M-, a lot of them of course were the uh, were the legends, you know the sagas you may as well say, and those don't appeal to me at all. (M: Um hm) Not at all. And uh, and a lot of the other ones are new, or new versions of them. And I said "Ach, there's nothing there for me." And I stuck it back on the shelf. And as I turned it fell back and hit me. Nearly knocked me out because it was a tome. And when I, when it fell, it opened. And you know wha-, how superstitious I am. And I looked and it said "The Kerry Mermaid." And that's one of my best known and loved mermaid stories today. Now you see, I read that story. But then I put into that story all the life that I possibly can with my lines.

M: And it was a familiar tale in a way, too.

P: A familiar tale, but of course, it particular, you know, God Almighty, as you know, is a, a good, an excellent folklorist. You know how many mermaid and seal stories are. (M: Sure) They're a dime a dozen nearly, and, and there's a terrible similarity about them. But with the Kerry Mermaid there is great difference. Now uh, a lot of people you know sitting out there in the audience, in the public, they wouldn't, they wouldn't recognize the great difference that there was. But you would, and I did. A terrific difference in (M: Yeah) this story. And that is of course what appealed to me in (M: Sure) that yarn. (M: Sure) So that in uh, I think it was my third tape, I did a very conservative, usual, a very beautiful one from County Antrim, on one side of the tape; but on the second side of the tape I then did this, to me, vitally different, (M: How

interesting) Kerry Mermaid. (M: How interesting) You know from the other end of (M: Yeah) the country. Uh huh. Yeah. But of course also you talked about, about work. O-one of the most difficult people for, eh one of the most difficult problems, excuse me, eh for, for any artist is to be employed. To be hired. [both talk] And (- -)

M: Finding work.

P: Finding work, and eh, many people have taken agents because of that. I never have. I still want to go and do a cheap job for something I believe in. And then I want to be able to ask a large fee from a large corporation or the like who want me to go along and give a forty-five minute talk after dinner. You know that sort of thing? I want to be able to, to ask for larger amounts when I want to and smaller amounts when, when I really believe in what, in what the situation is you know.

M: You know that they can't afford that fee.

P: And they can't afford that fee. But on the other hand you also have to be careful. You have to be careful that you are not used. I mean people will ring up and they will say, "But this is such a, this is such a good ah, this is wh-, a great promotion for you." And of course I've now been doing this since seventy-two as you know. And, and I will turn to them and I will say, "I'm sorry, I don't need promotion. I am very well known in my field." And of course some people might think that this is swell-headedness. It is not. It is, it is brusque Ulster honesty. That's what it is. Because nobody will take care of the artist but the artist. It's very, very seldom that you will get someone like you, being, being wonderful with Cora, and really taking care of Cora knowing the treasure that she is. Right? I mean that's the way Cora Bardwell is to you. But most people do not take care of artists. They very often treat artists like dirt. And if you were, if you were in a group of people, they would tell stories against themselves on how shabbily they have been used. And sometimes they are devastating stories. Luckily they have rarely happened to me, I think because I have such a harsh tongue.

M: Well you know you've hit on a very important issue and that is society's support of the artist, and I'm not speaking of financial support. But eh um, how have you been able to overcome that? The reality of the society at large not really making it easy for artists to, you know to be independently employed. Uh, for instance there's no a-artists uh network really that you can count on being there year after year. It's not really uh built into our society. You might have one that flourishes, and then when individuals who have helped it flourish move away or, or retire, then it just disappears. The society doesn't pick it up. Um (- -)

P: I-I'm not too sure. You see, I really and truly feel that if, if I were not married, I, I could not be the storyteller I am. I would become a lesser mortal. I am very proud to be a fine storyteller. I am very proud because I am proud of my material. I love my stories. So therefore what I want to do with my stories is to, to couch them and to present them in such a way as that they are like a diamond on black velvet rather than uh, a piece of glass on white paper. Do you understand? (M: Sure) I want to give the very best I possibly can. And, and that is very diff-, difficult, and the only way that I can do that is by being married and being supported by a man who luckily knows that I love doing this. That it is highly important to my, my being, (M: So)

you know.

M: In a way, having some kind of independence from uh (P: From monetary) required work.

P: From monetary, I mean people very often you know will say, "Well how come that you make so much money for forty-five minutes?" And I will say, "Look, if I make, if I make five hundred dollars for a forty-five minute concert," let's just, we'll state that amount, and people gasp when they hear that. I will say, "It is not for the forty-five minutes I am paid, it is for the fifty-seven years I have lived and my background that was staunch and true and that, that comes in my telling. That is what you pay for. Not forty-five minutes, but fifty-seven years."

M: Uh would you say that the opportunities to do forty-five minutes at five hundred dollars are less than the [chuckling] opportunities to do it for a great deal less?

P: Tha-, uh, I would, I would (M: Or fewer rather?) say, I would say that, that those, those times are few and far between, but they do happen (M: Sure) of course, they do happen, and very often you, you accept a challenge. Very often you will accept a challenge where, whereby you will maybe work on an idea, and instead of making a la-, you make a large amount, but that, that idea may run into ten different small shows. And you will maybe only make a hundred dollars a show. Do you understand? (M: Yeah) But on the other hand, you are working on something that is truly challenging. Perhaps with uh deprived children. I mer-, remember doing something in Fall River once. And they said, "We will give you so much work for a week, uh much money for a w-, a week's work, and, and I said, "But the amount of work that I do, if I were doing it in you know a different uh educational system, I would make much more money." But I liked the idea that I would be the first, the first artist to ever go to these really almost slum-dwelling type schools. And that's what I did. And I was working with mongoloids, I was working with eh, with children who were deprived, and of course with, with a lot of my work ah I could see that many of these children because of, of their, their life, eh they were not too bright some of them, so therefore I did a lot of childlike things with them. And I would take them on my knee, and, and I would cuddle them and I would do the rhymes of childhood. And, and these little children were not one bit frightened of bodily contact, whereas rich little children would die rather than even touch your hand. And I think this is very sad for our society (M: Um) today, that there's that horror, that need to leave at least two feet of space, unless you're really connected by blood.

M: So you have um, a, a, at times then seen your art as an attempt to [breach] that gap, that human void, (P: Yes) that we (P: Yes) throw up between ourselves. (P: Yes) Is that an important part of your, would you say that, um there are certain things that motivate you to stay working at your art other than being an artist?

P: Well of course I make a reasonable livelihood. I mean I often say to people, "I make what a poor shorthand typist would make in a year." (M: Yeah) You know. And of course also I l-, I like my work. I like my work for, for two reasons. The main thing is of course that I can impart to people eh an Ulster background. That's what I'm always very, very e-, I really do, I like to educate you know. I really do. But another one, eh is that I really love to be home. I am a lover of home. And even though of course I travel a great deal in the year, there is always the delight of thinking as I get into the airplane or on the train or into my car as I will today, "Good! Home

ahoy!" And off I go towards home. And of course if I were working a nine to five job, I couldn't do the research that very often my work entails. I also couldn't do the writing. I mean we haven't even spoken about my writing. (M: Exactly) And uh, a-, and you see that wouldn't give me time to write, eh to work on things, to write something for the tenth time. I-, it also wouldn't give me time to perhaps ring people. I wouldn't have the money to ring people across the country, and have a conversation about something that is tickling my fancy and I wanted another opinion on it and things like that. (M: Yeah) You know.

M: Well we would like to continue, but we, we both have to continue our work (P: Yes) on another location (P: Sure) in a very few minutes. (P: Yes) Maggi Pierce, thank you very much. Uhh I think there's a lot of food for thought in what you have said. I think uh, if, if um the Shifting Gears Program were wise, at some point or other they'd bring you in for another hour to discuss this very subject. You've really raised issues that need to be explored further.

P: Yes, and it would be, it would be interesting if you, Linda, on listening to this tape, eh would s-come up with the unasked questions.

M: [Noo, noo], I think that, th-, because you, you've prevented, presented a lot of information, that we haven't had time to pursue under f-rather adverse circumstances, and, in, in fact, [Mrs. Pierce laughs] in fact we may find that very little of this is distinguishable (P: Yes, yes) behind the brass band. [both laugh] But it has been um quite a lively energeti-, energizing thing anyway. Yeah. [laughs]

P: Meeting with you is always a delight, Linda! Thank you.

M: Thank you very much.

[end of tape]